In November, 2009, an agreement in concept was reached by a World Health Organization-convened international expert group meeting, supporting the phase-out of dental mercury use worldwide.

Dental Tribune Group Editor Daniel Zimmermann spoke with Prof. Lars Hylander, Associate Professor at the University of Uppsala in Sweden who attended the meeting, about the agreement and strategies for future biomaterials use in dentistry.

Daniel Zimmermann: Prof. Hylander, you recently attended a joint meeting of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) that aimed to assess the latest clinical evidence on dental restorative materials. Could you tell us about the outcome of the meeting?

Prof. Lars Hylander: Most participants agreed that amalgam should be phased out or at least phased down. Dr Poul Erik Petersen, Responsible Officer for Oral Health at the WHO, however, raised several good questions, such as what to tell people in poor countries who cannot even afford dental amalgam fillings. At this point, the room grew rather silent.

A similar consultation was held more than ten years ago. What has changed since then concerning the manner in which dental restorative materials are perceived?

Allergic reactions from amalgam fillings in some patients have been acknowledged by pro-amalgamists. Mercury leakages and emissions from dental amalgam into the environment have been fully acknowledged, particularly after dental amalgam was banned in Norway and Sweden, and restricted in Denmark and other places. Proof of methylmercury formation in wastewater from dental clinics is a third factor that makes the continued use of amalgam less justified. Another factor is that alternative tooth filling materials are now available or in development.

What has been decided regarding dental amalgam?
The WHO has not been as quick as Norway, who instituted a ban on dental amalgam in less than six months after the proposal of a ban was presented in the country. Thus far, nothing has been decided, but the WHO can hardly ignore the decision made by the world’s governments within the UNEP to negotiate a mercury treaty, which will begin in Stockholm next June.

There was some consensus that mercury use in dentistry should be phased down. A suitable way to do this is to begin teaching alternative restoration techniques, other than dental amalgam, in dental schools.

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There was a focus on the oral cavity, which thus ignored the environmental aspects such as mercury emissions from crematoria and leakage of mercury into wastewater from dental clinics and the wearing of amalgam surfaces due to everyday chewing. The American Dental Association demonstrated this most clearly in

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